The Who revives 'Tommy' with vibrant reunion performance

By DANNY McCUE
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Rock review

Twenty years ago, during a tour of Europe's opera houses after the group's triumphant Woodstock appearance, the Who first performed the songs from "Tommy," the world's first rock opera.

Performing Tuesday night before a packed house of musical stars (such as Jerry Lee Lewis) and eager fans at New York's Radio City Music Hall, the Who took to the stage to deliver once more on past promises, bringing "Tommy" back to vibrant life in the sold-out charity performance.

"Tommy" had once been as much a musical albatross to Who guitarist Pete Townshend as that other monolith of vintage Who, "My Generation," with its now-fabled line: "Hope I die befire I get old."

But any thoughts that this would be a somber occasion were quickly dispelled once the lights went down and the three surviving Who members staggered, laughing, onto the stage. Lead singer Roger Daltrey, attired in T-shirt and jeans, ambled to the mike and said, "As Keith Moon would have said, 'Have a little respect, it's a . . . opera.' "

As the opening chords of the overture from "Tommy" began filling the opulent hall, video screens behind the stage and to either side roared to life, offering a series of images (one was the original "Tommy" album cover) that complemented the songs. After years of turmoil within the band, and Ken Russell's terrible film adaptation in 1975, Townshend seemed assured that he had finally gotten his fable of a deaf, dumb and blind boy who finds salvation through pinball told right.

Townshend smiled frequently as he handled all the rhythm guitar chores on an acoustic electric that he played in the stage's "quiet zone," an area of reduced volume to protect Townshend's damaged hearing.

Bassist John Entwistle admirably held forth on the set's quirkiest number, "Cousin Kevin," and Daltrey, remarkably for a man now firmly in his 40s, played rock's golden boy with believable dedication.

The evening's biggest hand, though, went to the member of the band whose absence has left a void that the Who has never felt confident it could ever overcome. A picture of former drummer Moon, who died in 1978, appeared on the video screens as the band performed "Do You Think It's All Right" and "Fiddle About."

But among everyone on the stage this night (there were 12 musicians with the three Who members), clearly the most valuable player was drummer Simon Phillips, whom Townshend has been using on his solo projects for the past few years. It was Phillips who ignited the pyrotechnics of the Who of old. Growing more confident as the band proceeded from "Pinball Wizard" to "Go Smash the Mirror" and on through "We're Not Going to Take It," it was Phillips who provided the youthful punch that seemed to drive the band. Ironically, in what may be the band's last summer together, the Who has found its new drummer.

Except for slightly marring "Cousin Kevin" with an arrangement that recalled the band Chicago, the horn section was first rate. The backup vocalists were tight and used smartly. And the band, as a whole, was on a tear.

The Who followed Tommy with what can easily be considered a concert in its own right. Among the numbers were "Substitute," "Ba Ba O'Reilly," Bo Diddley's "I'm a Man," "A Friend is A Friend" (a selection from Townshend's current solo album), Entwistle's "My Wife," "Joined Together" and, of course, "Won't Get Fooled Again."

All proceeds from the concert are earmarked for the Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy Foundation, charities for abused children and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

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Associated Press

Roger Daltrey, foreground, and John Entwistle, background, perform last week in Glens Falls, N.Y., in a preview concert. The Who performed Tuesday night at Radio City Music Hall.